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THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINES AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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Recognizing the importance of doctrinal formulation in influencing ideals, this article makes certain suggestions concerning theological tendencies today. The older theology employed analogies taken from a régime of political autocracy. The modern social consciousness protests against these conceptions. This protest is responsible for the modern emphasis on divine fatherliness, the modification of the doctrine of retributive punishment, and the ideal of God as a never-ceasing co-worker with man in the achieving of good.

Correct intellectual conceptions of life must necessarily be a large factor in the origination and furtherance of movements for the improvement of the race. It must be acknowledged that individuals often act in a way conducive to social progress even though their systems of belief logically work toward reaction. In such cases their action is wiser than their doctrine. Many who believe that the present world is not only getting worse but must get increasingly worse until the Son of Man returns with catastrophic power to overthrow unrighteousness will nevertheless vote right upon measures such as Prohibition which are designed to make the world better at once. With a professed despair concerning the conquering power of the spiritual forces now in operation under the guidance of the Spirit of God, they nevertheless often unite in practical action with those who believe that the Kingdom of God may be established through the larger incoming of the spirit of Christ into the life of humanity.

It is undeniable, however, that such contradictions between theory and action make rapid progress in social development impossible. If we are to have enthusiasm and conquering power we must have a theory of life that will unloose all the energies of our souls. Men cannot achieve much success in

social reform when they believe in the inevitableness of failure. The spirit that promotes progress rests upon a belief that righteousness may be established and must be established now by the use of forces that our Lord and Master has placed at our command.

Clear, consistent thinking greatly promotes effectiveness of action. Whether we approve or disapprove of the Marxian theory that the making of profit upon the labor of others involves the robbery of the toiler, we can see that with its clear-cut definite message, it has done more to promote the present social unrest prevailing in all countries than almost all other factors put together. Every day the might of this theory is revealed. The number of thoroughgoing Marxian Socialists in America is not large but the influence of their propaganda has endangered capitalistic interests everywhere. They are mightily effective because they have a clear-cut theory as to the rights of labor, and have the enthusiasm and vigor for propaganda that such thinking always inspires. And this theory will doubtless continue to produce unrest and industrial strife until either the system of profit ceases or profit is shown to be socially necessary and advantageous.

If there is such dynamic in any clear-cut theory, why should we not bring our theological doctrines under review and see whether they have in them the power of moving men to action in the direction of promoting a world-order based upon righteousness? If we are able to interpret doctrinal beliefs to men so that their social value is evident, there will be a new interest in religion and a great acceleration of progress in everything that pertains to the welfare and happiness of humanity. If they cannot stand this test of social value, let them be added to the large list of discarded opinions and beliefs that men once considered the essentials of religious truth but which have been thrown aside never to be taken up again.

The development of the social consciousness has wrought havoc with many ideas that once were considered essential to

the Christian faith. As an illustration let me give a few lines from Joseph Alleine's *Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*:

Know therefore that while thou art unconverted, the Infinite God is engaged against thee. . . . As much as heaven is above the earth, omnipotence above impotence, infinity above nullity; so much more horrible is it to fall into the hands of the living God than into the paws of bears and lions, yea, furies or devils. His face is against thee. His heart is against thee. His hand is against thee. The holiness of God is full of antipathy against thee. He is not only angry with thee (so he may be with his own children) but he hath a fixed, rooted, habitual displeasure against thee. The power of God is mounted like a mighty cannon against thee. . . . Power and anger together make fearful work. . . . The wisdom of God is set to ruin thee. He hath ordained his arrows and prepared instruments of death and made all things ready. His counsels are against thee to contrive thy destruction. He laughs to see how thou wilt be taken and ensnared in the evil day. . . . All the attributes of an infinite God are bound by an oath to punish thee. . . . If the Almighty hath power to torment thee, thou shalt be perfectly miserable in soul and body to all eternity unless it be prevented by speedy conversion.

Where do we hear such a voice today? What has occurred? Simply this: The world has largely passed out from autocratic systems of human government, and with the larger emphasis placed upon the rights of men has outgrown those conceptions of God which made him a capricious and unreasonable tyrant. Alleine's preaching was effective in the day when absolute monarchs, filled with caprice, hatred, and self-glory, wrought their own will upon the persons and possessions of their subjects. But in an age of democratic ideals and institutions it awakens no response. In fact it repels all right-thinking people.

In the nineteenth century great social questions tended to bring out the contrast between tyrannical and humane conceptions of God. When the system of human slavery was in danger, its defenders turned to the Bible for weapons to use in the struggle. The fact that at that time the great mass of the people believed that inspiration involved infallibility and

that all parts of the Bible were equally inspired made it possible to build up an argument that slavery was an institution sanctioned by God. On the other hand, the moral consciousness of many good men was in revolt. Whittier, reading in the *Courier* of Charleston, S.C., concerning a celebrated pro-slavery meeting held September 4, 1835, was mightily indignant when his eyes rested on these words: "The clergy of all denominations attended in a body, lending their sanction to the proceedings, and adding by their presence to the impressive character of the scene."

Just God! and these are they
 Who minister at thine altar, God of Right!
 Men who their hands with prayer and blessing lay
 On Israel's Ark of light!

What! preach and kidnap man?
 Give thanks,—and rob thy own afflicted poor?
 Talk of thy glorious liberty, and then
 Bolt hard the captive's door?

What! servants of thy own
 Merciful Son, who came to seek and save
 The homeless and the outcast,—fettering down
 The tasked and plundered slave!

How long, O Lord! how long
 Shall such a priesthood barter truth away,
 And in thy name, for robbery and wrong
 At thy own altars pray?

The logic of events was that a system of biblical interpretation which outraged the growing moral consciousness of men could not stand.

Contemporaneous with the changes from autocracy to democracy in government, and with the development of humarer feelings and methods in regard to the slave, the outcast, the unfortunate, changes were taking place in the realm of theological thought and in the method of studying the Scriptures. The scientific spirit was abroad and could not but affect the viewpoints of men concerning religion. The criticism of biblical writings began to shake the old foundations of faith.

In the midst of great uncertainty concerning some of the books of the Bible, many persons fell back upon the narratives which tell how Jesus moved among the masses in the days of his flesh. The human Jesus was re-discovered and the more clearly his spirit was discerned, the more fully did men feel that he truly represented the attitude of God to men. His great message of the Fatherhood of God, a Fatherhood which was beautifully portrayed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, awakened a response in the moral consciousness of men. They felt that this presentation of God and his love must be the truth. Thus all conceptions of God that made him tyrannical and unloving were gradually but surely undermined. Crude views may long survive, but the great mass of good men will refuse to retain pagan conceptions of the character of God. The Eternal Father cannot be lacking in all those virtues that we expect an ordinary good father to have today. As Whittier said:

Can hatred ask for love? Can Selfishness
Invite to self-denial? Is he less
Than man in kindly dealing? Can he break
His own great law of fatherhood, forsake
And curse his children?

The changes that have taken place in government, social conceptions, and theology have made it impossible for many preachers of Christianity to proclaim the doctrine of an everlasting fire in hell from which there can be no escape for a sinner who dies unforgiven. Eternal loss is possible. If I have sinned against God and men today, if I have failed to do my duty toward them, I have lost something that I can never regain. But belief in eternal unconditional punishment is not easy in an age which believes that Jesus truly interpreted God's thought and spirit, that God is a real Father to men. It is not easy in an age which is adopting programmes of prison reform and the parole system, which is emphasizing the principle that punishment should be preventive and remedial

rather than retributive, which recognizes that many crimes are the result of abnormal physical or psychical conditions, which is looking forward to the abolition of capital punishment. The idea behind this modern attitude toward offenders is that God expects his children to put forth the best possible effort to effect the restoration of the lost. Will he himself fail to honor the principle? "Is he less than man in kindly dealing?" The eternal damnation of unbaptized infants was once accepted almost universally as an essential truth of Christianity. But it is rejected by countless millions today who feel that it is a reflection upon the character of God. It has broken down before the logic of a mother's love and before the development of humane feelings in the hearts of the people. In an age charged with social sympathies it is strangely out of place.

Theological and social progress are inseparable; they act and react upon each other. Sometimes the impulse forward comes from the social reformer and sometimes from the student of theology. Where doctrines are crude or social conditions unjust, there is bound to be a revolt which sooner or later affects both realms. In the Protestant Reformation religious and economic factors worked together. Luther was stirred by the sight of religious abuses and from this was led to call into question the whole ecclesiastical system. Many of the princes of Germany were glad to be free from the political domination of Rome and were particularly pleased to support a movement which interfered with the continuous stream of gold flowing to the Vatican. In England likewise the great change was brought about and maintained by governmental, social, and religious influences working together. In our modern age we see the revolt against unjust conditions in the industrial realm, and on the other hand we witness a great revival of interest in the messages of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah, brought about by the application of the historical method to the study of the Scriptures. In the center of all the conflicting and co-operating forces stands the personality of Jesus who is

claimed alike by the theologian and by the industrial reformer. Thus by many lines of impulsion the Spirit of God is pushing the world forward to clearer conceptions of truth and to a larger, fuller life for humanity. The Christian church should open its heart to the inspiring, energizing, and unifying influence of that Spirit. It should have broad social ideals and sympathies and such a theory of God's relationships to men that in thought and action it would be the most consistent and influential of all organizations in ushering in the better day.

This transformation of theological conceptions under the influence of social ideals may be illustrated by noting certain aspects of the modern conception of God.

We must recognize that all static views of God are inimical to social progress. He is the living God and as a great personality has ever given expression to himself in many and varied activities. Some of our teachers, however, would have us believe that he did not begin to work until about six thousand years ago. The logic of their theory is that previous to that time he existed as a Being inert, silent, motionless, finding satisfaction in self-contemplation. Through all eternity, forever and forever, he lived without even matter around him out of which to fashion a universe. This earth with its resources, problems, and destiny was only an afterthought. About six thousand years ago he created matter out of nothing by fiat and in six days made the world and created man. Such a theory dishonors God and deprives man of all inspiration for a life of service. If God did nothing for all eternity, why should man look upon a life of activity as either necessary or desirable?

Fortunately, scientific men have given us a much more extensive view of what the Christian may rightly term the activities of God. Perhaps man has been living upon this planet for 100,000 years. This in no wise should give a shock to theological students except that the time claimed may be altogether too short. From a doctrinal point of view I would be glad if they could prove that man's life upon this or some

other planet extended over millions of years. It would show that the heart of the Eternal Father always appreciated children.

Nor should there be any dismay over the claim that this earth is some hundreds of millions of years old and that the universe as a whole has a history that can hardly be measured. Any statement of this kind is preferable to the idea that God just began to work a few thousand years ago. In fact it is just as easy for me to believe in the eternity of matter as to accept the theory that this vast and mighty universe was created out of nothing. So long as the personality of God is retained, I see no reason why we should not think of him working in every part of this great world throughout an immeasurable past. The fact that the human spirit reveals its directing and controlling power in the operations of a material body does not destroy its supremacy. Rather, therein does it reveal its supremacy, its transcendence. My spirit is now operating through my brain and hand but it is greater than either. It is transcendent and immanent. Is it a thing impossible that the great Personality whom we call God should always have operated through the material universe? The Pauline doctrine given in Eph. 4:6 is strictly up-to-date: "One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in you all." This view may seem to place limitations upon the nature and operations of the Divine; but we do this also in other phases of our reasoning, as for instance when we attribute personality to human beings, accepting the fact that they have the power to will either for or against the purposes of God. To escape this dilemma thinkers have often resorted to Pantheism, but I would prefer to accept the theory that there are limitations to the power and activities of God. This makes it possible for us to accept the theory of the everlastingness of matter so long as we guard the point that through it all the Divine Spirit has been ceaselessly operating and using all things for the expression of his will.

Let us return to the aim of this phase of our discussion which is to establish the theory of God as the Eternal Worker. As Jesus said, "My Father worketh until now and I work" (John 5:17). The Christian view of life involves work, a proper use and development of the material world for the good of mankind. Such effort is not optional. It is the law of the universe; it is the will of God. Every man is bound to do his best even as God has been doing his best. God *has* been doing his best. You cannot accept the alternative that he has only been using his resources in a limited measure. If you do, you have no legitimate ground upon which to demand that men should put forth special effort in any line whatever. The view of God advocated in this paper makes it imperative for every person to use his powers to the fullest extent possible for the good of humanity. We must seek to discover and utilize all the resources of our world to the end that the personalities of men may be developed to the highest possible degree. There is no slackening in production according to God's plan of life. Just now the Eternal Worker is calling upon all men to cease fighting and to *produce, produce, produce, to distribute, to distribute, to distribute*. The scientist, the miner, the fisherman, the carpenter, the farmer, should co-operate with God not for increased profits but to meet the needs of millions who are sorely pressed for the bare necessities of life. The "slacker" in peace is just as unworthy as the "slacker" in war.

If the aim of God is the enrichment of the personalities of men so that they may have fellowship with himself and live helpfully and happily together among themselves, then the preacher, the teacher, the philosopher, the poet, the musician, the artist, all may find their places as workers together with God. Every sphere of human life is dignified by this thought and every worker has the highest inspiration for service.

Such a view of God not only sets before us a great example but it indicates the imperative nature of our responsibility. In the spiritual realm as well as in the physical, if anything more

is to be done for men, *we must do it.* God cannot do any more until we put forth more effort. When we begin he will work through us. There are some who think that God has great resources of power that he is not using, power that he will only use when we intercede earnestly with him. Such a view means that he could look on a world in sin and misery without doing his utmost to help it, that he could take a half-hearted interest in the salvation of men and that anything he might do would be in the nature of a condescension. This is the old aristocratic view of God. The God whom I seek to worship and serve is One who could not look upon a world in need without putting forth all his power to save, One who is now doing everything possible to lead humanity to fulness of life. If anything more is to be done—and every sane person recognizes that the needs of every nation, material and spiritual, are enormous and that great constructive plans must be carried out to save the people and the interests of civilization—then the most tremendous responsibility comes to each one of us to enlist in the service and to do our best. We cannot depend upon an upward tendency or even a Divine Urge to ensure progress. Civilization may fail, chaos may become universal, the darkness of medieval night may once again settle down upon the world. God could not have saved Europe from the barbarism of the fifth, seventh, and tenth centuries or he would have done it. If he could have done it, what view are we to take concerning his character? The trouble was that too few persons shared in his sympathies and activities. Altogether too few were under the influence of his great heart of love and the guidance of his Spirit. And today as seldom before in the world's history every interest of God and man is imperilled. Progress is not inevitable. Eternal vigilance is not only the price of liberty but of everything upon which man depends for nobler living. Good will not be the final goal of ill unless we make it so. And in the effort to win the world for truth and love and righteousness every last man will count.

Let us go out and get more men! With hearts and lives fully surrendered to God and his purposes we shall share with him in the achievement of the great desire of his heart—the emancipation and perfecting of the race, the full establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The view thus advocated concerning God will help to answer some of the questions presented to us by perplexed Christians and critical unbelievers. Why didn't God prevent the sinking of the Lusitania? the death of the soldier boy for whom mothers and sisters prayed? the war itself? Some will answer, "He didn't choose to do it." Could he have prevented these things? "Yes, but he did not choose to prevent them." Can we not see that such answers call into question the character of God? At this stage let me say in all humility I would sacrifice the theory of God's absoluteness at any time rather than leave ground for the impeachment of his moral character. I do not believe he could have prevented the war. Through the messages and life and sacrifice of Jesus, through all the great prophets before and after Jesus, through every earnest soul that has been seeking to lead mankind into an understanding of the love and peace of God, our Heavenly Father sought to turn men away from the spirit that produced the war, but men would not be turned away. And when millions of soldiers lined up against each other, armed and supported with the most deadly weapons that the mind of man could invent, God could not save the life of every boy whose parents were praying for him. For all the loss and sorrow, the degradation and the shame of recent years man, not God, was responsible.

Men might as well face their responsibility. We are free to make this earth the Kingdom of Hell or the Kingdom of Heaven. Every unjust act, every deed of selfishness and greed, every untruth, every abuse of power, every lustful act or licentious look tends to make possible the Kingdom of Hell. If we live falsely, selfishly, dishonestly, we are making a direct

contribution to strife, chaos, hopelessness. There is a glorious alternative, however, which may be realized if we bring ourselves fully into line with the principles of brotherhood exemplified in Jesus. The point to be emphasized is that it rests with the people of the present generation to determine what shall be the conditions of life for those succeeding us. If we do not co-operate with God in working out His thought, God alone cannot avert the disaster that must follow.

To quote Whittier again:

The Crisis presses on us; face to face with us it stands,
With solemn lips of question, like the Sphinx in Egypt's sands!
This day we fashion Destiny, our web of fate we spin;
This day for all hereafter choose we holiness or sin;
Even now from starry Gerizim, or Ebal's cloudy crown,
We call the dews of blessing, or the bolts of cursing down.

It may be objected that the view of God thus presented makes him a very human Being. To this we may reply that non-human conceptions of God entirely fail to move people to devotion or service. The inhuman conceptions of former ages moved men to fear if not to love; the non-human conceptions offered by some today do not move men to anything. You cannot stir any passion for righteousness by talking about an Absolute who is above all relations. Man needs a human God, a Heavenly Father, not an abstraction. We do not get very far in inspiring people for service when, in our search for a unity in which all differences, even those of right and wrong, are harmonized, we arrive at a non-personal Absolute. Neither do views of a personal Absolute, which reduce human personality to appearance rather than reality, have driving power in them. While we must not depend upon the pragmatic test alone, we may safely conclude that all true conceptions of God have in them a dynamic impelling men to social endeavor.

The Christian view of God must not underestimate the fact that he is a living Being and that as a Great Personality he lives intensely. Everything that takes place in his great

universe is a matter of vital interest to him. Through the love and service of his children, his life is enriched every hour. He is ever having new experiences. The history of men is not the rehearsing of a drama thought out and prepared in eternal ages but a real living vital experience in which God and men share. Highest joys and deepest sorrows are his according as men work with or against him. He doubtless is vastly more than we can conceive him to be but he cannot be other than good and purposeful and active. All this may be anthropomorphic but it accords with the highest and noblest desires of the human heart and has in it the mightiest dynamic for service. The one great necessity for social progress is that men shall accept, with all its implications, the teaching of Jesus that God is our Heavenly Father.